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Researchers assist school's solar bike racing team

by Karen Katzenbach, Aeronautical Systems Center

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AFB, OHIO — For the third consecutive year, students from Dayton's Patterson Career Center will be competing in Solar Bike Rayce USA in Topeka, Kan. The Patterson team was helped in its efforts by researchers at the Air Force Research Laboratory.

Robert Kaiser, a drafting teacher at Patterson and team coordinator, found out about the competition at a 1996 meeting of the Wright Site educational outreach program.

"When I heard about it, I said, 'This is something my kids could do,'" Kaiser said.

The race features teams of four competing with solar panels and batteries which provide extra propulsion power to assist the rider.

Kaiser went back to the school and along with his brother, Tony, an electronics teacher at Patterson, put together a group of students.

"We scratched and kicked and clawed our way to a point where we could have a viable team."

Despite their determination, however, the Patterson team knew they needed a little help and entered into a partnership with the AFRL.

"We knew what we needed to do but they were a whole lot smarter about it," Kaiser said.

In preparation for the 1997 race, lab officials put Kaiser in contact with NASA-Glenn experts who helped the team obtain solar panels for the bike.

In 1998, the Patterson team took first place in the competition that consists of a 400-meter sprint and a 100-kilometer relay.

This year, researchers at AFRL's Propulsion directorate here have advised the team on the type of battery pack the bike should carry.

"They helped us go from carrying a 30-pound battery pack to just a 10-pound pack that is even more powerful," Kaiser said.

"The bottom line for the kids is that this is an opportunity for them to experience something that they wouldn't normally," Kaiser said. "This shows the real world application of technology, which is great for these kids to see." **@**